

Introduction

At the request of Ms. Lisa Meyerson of the Government Information Technology Agency (GITA), Dr. Jennifer L. Hendry of Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) facilitated a public joint Working Session of the Arizona Public Safety Communications Advisory Commission (PSCC) and the Statewide Interoperability Executive Committee (SIEC) on November 20, 2008, which included participation from 75 commissioners, committee members, representatives, delegates, non-governmental organizations, and members of the general public. This working session focused on the current status of interoperable communications across Arizona (including discussions of what is working for responders statewide, what areas need improvement, and how planners can best capitalize on successes moving forward) and the future for Arizona interoperability. The session included significant discussions on how to advance the state forward along all lanes of the Interoperability Continuum and afforded participants much appreciated opportunities to identify their needs specific to communications training and developing interoperability SOPs. The content and discussions from this meeting will be used to inform future decisions regarding grant allocations, procurements, training development, outreach programs, and policy/procedure development.

The following report is a synopsis of Dr. Hendry's observations during this working session and should be considered for advisory purposes only. GITA staff members will compile the official record of the working session including meeting minutes and the full session transcription.

Current Status of Interoperability

The Working Session agenda began with a focused discussion of the current status of various interoperability projects across the state of Arizona. From this discussion, GITA representatives and attendees were able to compile a robust list of existing interoperability projects and the perceived successes/lessons learned related to those projects. For example, attendees affirmed that existing projects like the Arizona Interagency Radio System (AIRS) are working and successful where training has been provided and responders are able to gain a familiarity with the tool. The background information and the articulated statements of the participants will be invaluable as GITA and Arizona move forward and should be used to inform decisions related to IECGP and other grant opportunities.

Throughout the Working Session, all participants raised the funding, support, and action needs of the non-technology components of interoperability including training, governance, and SOP development. Attendees clearly identified a vacuum related to training coordination and curriculum development statewide. For example, some participants felt that the Arizona Department of Emergency and Military Affairs (AZDEMA) was responsible for statewide training programs while the AZDEMA representative did not acknowledge that his agency held any such mandate.

Arizona should consider filling this identified training vacuum as a primary goal for the near term. Investigate forming a Training Subcommittee to the PSCC that can identify training opportunities, devise certification recommendations, assist with curriculum development, etc. Also strive to leverage existing opportunities (e.g., COML,

ICS/NIMS, etc.) where curriculum, certifications, and qualified trainers exist. Lastly, consider utilizing a training consultant familiar with the current interoperable communications training and certification processes who can advise a newly formed committee and help accelerate training programs.

Working Session discussions also further clarified and identified the need for an outreach plan designed to inform and garner the inputs of unrepresented and/or underrepresented agencies. GITA outreach staff took note of this information and are currently drafting approaches that operate within Arizona's public meeting laws and also provide a low-cost, realistic approach for encouraging future participation from some previously underrepresented entities.

Demonstration Project

A key success of the Working Session was the verbalized consensus regarding the status of the Demonstration Project. Participants agreed that the Project was complete and did not seek further work or funding related to previously identified follow-on elements. As one note of caution, Assistant Phoenix Police Chief Tracy Montgomery stated that Phoenix has made a significant investment in this project even without a supportive agreement and may feel they engaged in the Demonstration Project "on a handshake." With the successful conclusion of this project in mind, Arizona officials may wish to codify the plans and agreements related to future projects of this type to more definitively document expected project outcomes, project partners, milestones, and conclusion criteria.

Operational Definitions

Participants engaged in significant, important discussions regarding some basic definitions. While these discussions appear to have occurred perhaps more than once in the past, resolution was not previously forthcoming. Participants did make significant strides at this meeting by agreeing that interoperability and operability exist along a continuum with the former building upon the latter, identifying the value of consistent and practical definitions to grant funding decisions, procurement decisions, etc., recognizing the limitations in existing definitions, and articulating alternatives to those definitions.

As the PSCC moves forward to select and utilize these operational definitions, SAIC suggests considering the following wording alternatives based on the conversations during the Working Session:

- **Operability:** The ability of public safety responders within a single agency to share information via voice and/or data communications systems on demand, in real time, when needed, and as authorized. Often referred to as "Daily Operations."
- **Interoperability:** The ability of public safety responders from multiple agencies to share information via voice and/or data communications systems on demand, in real time, when needed, and as authorized.

In essence, Operability refers to reliable intra-agency communications, while Interoperability extends this requirement to include inter-agency communications. These revised definitions:

- Have a consistent unit of measure (i.e. focus on responders in both cases rather than responders in one and agencies in another)
- Focus the primary distinction on the number of agencies communicating (i.e. allowing for system upgrades and refinements to be considered for interoperability funds if they can demonstrate an enhancement for communications between agencies on that shared system)
- Make the language of “on demand, in real time, when needed, and as authorized” consistent across both definitions.

As the discussion moved beyond the operability vs. interoperability debate, “system of systems” was identified as a key definition for the future interoperability plans in Arizona. SAIC suggests considering the following definition:

- **Systems of Systems**: Two or more operable public safety radio systems interconnected in such a way as to provide on-demand voice interoperability (with minimal or no dispatcher or technician intervention) between responders from agencies on those systems, in real time, and as authorized.

This revised definition:

- Recognizes that participants seemed to feel more comfortable with any future State system representing an equal player in a future “system of systems” rather than as a superior or subordinate system. Therefore, this definition does not imply any ranking of the involved systems.
- Reflects the primary need for an operable system in advance of incorporating that system into interoperable communications.
- Maintains the unit of measure as responders to allow for consistency.
- Maintains on-demand, in real time, and as authorized in the language again for consistency.
- Identifies the value in solutions which require minimal real-time interventions and which are more “invisible” to the end user, thus enhancing their tactical applications.

Next Steps & Future Plans

As the Working Session wound down, participants worked to more clearly define the operational and interoperational future needs of a statewide system. Participants clearly identified the limiting constraints of the current fiscal environment but acknowledged that they still felt that there was a “right” way forward. Participants envisioned this system as primarily an operational resource for Department of Public Safety (DPS), Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT), and other state responders that could also serve as an operational platform for smaller agency subscribers and an interoperability platform for other agencies, as desired. Going forward, GITA and all stakeholders are encouraged to pursue accurate and unbiased assessments of the various factors related to a purchase as large and costly as a statewide system. These factors could include the choice of frequency band, vendor, equipment, and/or infrastructure requirements. While some participants stated that existing frequency band analyses would be sufficient for decision making purposes going forward, SAIC and GITA both voiced some reservations regarding the accuracy and age of those assessments. In this case, be aware that some of these assessments may be available to Arizona through either the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Emergency Communications (OEC) or the

Department of Commerce Public Safety Interoperable Communications (PSIC) technical assistance programs. Be sure to thoroughly research all alternatives and move forward with informed and sound decisions.

Finally, the Working Session provided GITA with a forum to announce the National Governors Association (NGA) Governance Academy grant award and projected PSCC/SIEC meetings beginning in January. GITA wisely used a portion of the Working Session to garner participation and support for those endeavors. Potential attendees were identified and participants seemed to appreciate that their previous governance efforts were being leveraged moving forward rather than being discarded during the transition process.

Conclusion

Dr. Hendry felt that this Working Session was a productive step forward for the Arizona public safety communications community as they move from a difficult transition into the next phase of interoperable communications planning. Participants were able to openly voice their opinions, peers were able to hear and consider those opinions, and much needed information was presented that will help GITA and response agencies around the state move forward with their various interoperability projects. The critical next step will be to assemble a PSCC and/or SIEC quorum in January to take action on the information discussed during this Working Session and then to move forward with training development, outreach, and Statewide Communications Interoperability Plan (SCIP) revisions and/or initiative implementation. SAIC thanks GITA for allowing us to facilitate and share in your endeavors and looks forward to continuing to support Arizona in the weeks and months ahead.